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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000279

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2016
TAGS: [KISL](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: MUFTI OF THE REPUBLIC CALLS FOR REPLACING
LAHOUD, BUT NOT WITH AOUN

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) On January 30, the Ambassador met with Mufti of the Republic Mohammad Rashid Qabbani. The Ambassador noted that the Embassy was urging a reduction in personal attacks and a calming of rhetoric. The Ambassador also dispelled rumors that the USG was going to make a deal with Syria, and that the USG was trying to control Lebanon. Qabbani called for the replacement of President Emile Lahoud. He said that Muslims should allow Christians to name the presidential candidates. Qabbani expressed his hope that Christians do not nominate MP Michel Aoun because he "is not a ruler, is not wise," and is inflexible. However, if momentum builds to remove Lahoud, Hizballah would protect Lahoud if necessary, opined Qabbani. While acknowledging that Usama Bin Laden probably destroyed the U.S. embassies in Africa, Qabbani then launched into a convoluted defense of his conspiracy theory that the FBI and CIA helped Al Qaida commit the 9/11 attacks. The Ambassador reminded Qabbani of the abundant (and publicly available) evidence that Al Qaida perpetrated the 9/11 attacks. End summary.

AMBASSADOR URGES CALM

12. (C) On January 30, the Ambassador, econoff, and political specialist met with Mufti of the Republic Mohammad Rashid Qabbani, the highest ranking Sunni cleric in Lebanon. Noting the need to refute many intentionally misleading stories in the press about U.S. policy, the Ambassador opened the meeting by expressing his support for the unity of Lebanon. Furthermore, the Ambassador wanted to dispel two popular (and mutually exclusive) rumors: that the USG will make a deal with Syria over Lebanon, and that the USG is trying to control Lebanon. The USG will support Lebanon on a day-to-day basis, but ultimately the cabinet must be re-united, the Ambassador explained. It is up to the cabinet of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to find a solution. The Ambassador continued that he is urging Lebanese privately to curtail their use of personal attacks. The level of rhetoric and personal attacks is helping fuel confessional tensions.

QABBANI: REPLACE LAHOUD,
BUT NOT WITH AOUN

13. (C) Qabbani welcomed the Ambassador's visit and said that he supported MP Saad Hariri's statement in Washington calling for an internal dialogue over Hizballah's arms. Qabbani said he wanted a solution for "the resistance," but

not against "the resistance." He was less generous regarding the status of President Emile Lahoud. Qabbani called for Lahoud's removal from office, saying that two more years with Lahoud was too much time. Lahoud was impeding progress. Qabbani did not have a specific plan of how to remove Lahoud from the presidency, but suggested that parliament could do it. Christians must decide on whom to replace Lahoud with and present candidates to the Muslim (Sunni, Shia, and Druze) communities. Qabbani said that Muslims could then decide on whether to support the Christian nominee, but should not be involved in naming the candidates. Qabbani commented that his Maronite counterpart, Patriarch Bishop Mar Nasrallah Sfeir, should be active in bringing the Christian community together, but should not be involved in selecting the candidates.

¶4. (C) At the same, Qabbani expressed hope that the Christians would not nominate MP Michel Aoun. Qabbani did not hold back on his distrust of Aoun, saying that Aoun was not a ruler and not wise. He continued that Aoun is inflexible because he thinks like a military man. In a criticism of both Lahoud and Aoun, Qabbani questioned how any military man could serve as the president in a democratic way. He gave the historical example of Fouad Chehab, a former general who became president in the 1950s. "He ruled by way of the Second Directorate (Army Intelligence)," explained Qabbani. Mocking Aoun's claims of negotiations with Hizballah, Qabbani cited how pro-Aoun Shia MP Abbas Hashem bragged that Aoun, and only Aoun, supported the resistance. Aoun's strategy is to say that he supports Hizballah, snorted Qabbani.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked Qabbani whether he believes Hizballah would militarily or physically defend Lahoud if

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there was a push for a presidential transition. Qabbani replied that he thinks Hizballah would defend Lahoud, but would not need to "take to the streets." A strong statement by Hizballah would probably be enough to protect Lahoud and to intimidate other factions.

AND NOW FOR A CONSPIRACY
THEORY OR TWO...

¶6. (C) The Ambassador next asked Qabbani to comment on Sunni-Shia tensions and the status of Sunni extremism in northern Lebanon. Qabbani, as if inexorably drawn, took a turn into familiar territory: impossible conspiracy theories. He claimed that the 13 men arrested last month were not associated to Al Qaida. They were only guilty of possessing weapons in their households, he said. Turning to the larger issue of Al Qaida, Qabbani said that he did not believe that Al Qaida could have executed the 9/11 attacks on its own. Given the power of U.S. security agencies, Al Qaida must have had help from the FBI or CIA to enter the airports and to fly the planes into their intended targets. (Comment: Embassy political specialist later commented that he thought Qabbani was trying to imply a Jewish conspiracy without making a direct reference. End comment.) The Ambassador replied there is abundant evidence that Usama Bin Laden and Al Qaida were behind the 9/11 attacks, as well as the two embassy bombings in Africa in 1998. In fact, a committee held public hearings and published a public report on the evidence, as well as recommendations for improvement in USG security measures. Qabbani acknowledged that Bin Laden might indeed have been responsible for other attacks, including the Embassy bombings, and he emphasized that he did not support Bin Laden or see him as representative of Islam. He also raised the issue of a cartoon in Denmark which many Muslims feel is disrespectful to the Prophet Mohammad. "Freedom must have its boundaries." said Qabbani.

COMMENT

17. (C) Until he led this discussion into the lunacy zone of offensive conspiracy theories, Qabbani spoke with more clarity than he had in any previous discussion with the Ambassador. Never before, with us, had he explicitly called for the removal of Lahoud. As a subsidized asset of the Hariris, Qabbani is generally supportive of the views of the March 14 coalition. But usually he postures as more of a cautious fence-sitter, so his attacks on Lahoud and Aoun were unexpected.

FELTMAN